

Professional Self-Care Strategies for Students: Supporting Practice Educators to Support Students

Health care settings can be an emotionally challenging environment to work in.

As a therapist, every day we are exposed to people who have experienced an illness, injury or disability. As a result of these conditions people may also be experiencing emotional distress, grief and loss, heightened anxiety, uncertainly about their future.

Because of our frequent exposure to our client group and the distress that these people are going through, we can forget what it might be like for a student who may be experiencing this situation for the first time.

As therapists, over time we develop a 'suit of emotional armour' that helps protect us against some of this distress and exposure to confronting and traumatic situations, however it is important for us to remember that our students are yet to develop this protective armour.

For some students, their practice education placement may be the first time they have set foot in a hospital or health care setting. The sights, sounds, smells and routines are all unfamiliar. Some may have a basic understanding of the environment through their own experience or that of a loved one; however they may not be familiar with the client's health condition and associated issues.

A lot of scenarios may be confronting for students.

- Physical environment – sights and smells: tubes / medical equipment / machines / complex equipment
- Physical ill health – malnutrition, obesity
- Injuries – burns, wounds
- Palliative care or client death
- Case histories may be traumatic – abuse (sexual, physical, psychological), domestic violence, self-harm, past suicide attempts
- Witnessing challenging behaviour
- Visiting clients who are in situations of abuse, neglect, squalor
- Distressed families / carers
- Knowing someone who is receiving care
- Working with people who are the same age / stage of life
- Having had their own health issue
- Having had a family member who has experienced the same condition as the client.

We aren't necessarily going to know what the emotional trigger or event is for each student, however there are some steps we can take to prepare students for working in practice settings.

- Before placement:
 - enquire about the students exposure to health settings
 - enquire about any concerns the student may have about the placement or client group
 - enquire about any questions the student wants to ask
 - provide information re: the client group, service setting and common issues the student may be exposed to
 - provide students with suggested reading/s about health conditions.

- Orientation to placement:
 - take time to introduce students to the healthcare environment, show them equipment, explain procedures
 - enquire again about any concerns or questions - new questions may have surfaced since you last spoke.
- Preparation before client sessions:
 - provide access to client files
 - explain health conditions, the clients situation and what might be expected
 - negotiate the students role in the client appointment
 - discuss the way you as the therapist work with this client (helpful strategies, communication style).
- Debriefing after client sessions:
 - ensure time is allocated to talk to the student about their observations and reactions
 - help the student to understand the situation and what they have seen
 - discuss your own strategies for managing challenging situations.

Students can at times be left feeling like the staff is blasé about the situations they are exposed to. Events may not be spoken about or the clinician moves from one appointment to the next without taking a breath. Supervisors need to role model self-care behaviours, share their experiences, share self-management strategies and help the student understand how you cope.

While practice educators have a responsibility to provide emotional support to students, students also need to take responsibility for their own wellbeing.

- Ask questions about what to expect
- Do your own research into health conditions and impacts
- Be honest with your supervisor about how you are coping
- Seek opportunities for debriefing
- If your supervisor is unavailable ask to speak with another member of the team
- If you go home thinking about events of the day, take this as a sign that you may need to talk with your supervisor the following morning.

Some general emotional self-care strategies for staff and students to think about.

- Talk – unless you speak up, no one will know you need support
- Debrief with your team - don't practice in isolation
- Engage in supervision
- Take breaks
- Leave work at work
- Do something that signals the end of the work day e.g. tidy your desk, write a list for tomorrow, get out of your work clothes when you get home, go for a run, listen to music in the car
- Ensure you find purpose in activities outside of work and invest energy in these
- Personal stress management strategies – relaxation, regular exercise, socialisation, adequate sleep, healthy eating
- Acknowledge that sometimes no matter what we do we cannot assist the people we work with – people need to make their own choices about their health care; sometimes they may not choose to receive care and conversely sometimes they may want care and we may not be able to provide it.
- The Employee Assistance Program is available for short term counseling if needed.